



Media Contact: Mary Ellen Fiorino
Wexner Medical Center Media Relations
614-293-3737
mary.fiorino@osumc.edu

February 7, 2022

(Video and photos available for download: <https://bit.ly/34zTQBP>)

SUPPORTING ATHLETES OF ALL LEVELS WITH COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH CARE

COLUMBUS, Ohio – As the world shifts its attention to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, it brings another opportunity to shine a spotlight on the mental health of athletes. Experts at [The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center](#) stress the importance of combining the care of sports psychologists and sports psychiatrists to support the unique mental health challenges athletes face, whether it's recovering from an injury or coping with the pressures of competition.

To excel in any sport, athletes must be focused, tough and driven. It's what athletes at the highest level constantly strive for, embodying the Olympic spirit. Despite expectations, athletes are not machines. They're human. Ignoring their emotions, fears and overall mental health can not only be detrimental to any athlete's ability to perform, but also to their lives outside of the sport.

"That stoic toughness that athletes possess is a real strength that helps them put on their game face, helps them get through any ups and downs in the competition effectively," said [Jen Carter](#), sport psychologist at Ohio State Wexner Medical Center. "And when they're off the field, that can be a weakness because it can prevent them from asking for help. We can't do it all alone. We aren't alone."

Injuries are often a catalyst to mental health struggles, and while the physical trauma heals over time with concrete steps for recovery, emotional scarring often remains and is far more difficult to see.

[Dr. Joshua Norman](#), sports psychiatrist at Ohio State Wexner Medical Center, said, "You can see a broken arm. You can see a lab value that supports hypertension. Mental health is a bit more abstract and nuanced, but it's equally as impactful if not more impactful. The two are very interrelated and can significantly increase your quality of life if these things are well controlled and well treated."

Some athletes exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a severe injury, such as avoidance, hypervigilance and fear, which prevent them from fully recovering. [Ohio State Sports Medicine](#) experts say it's imperative to understand sport culture to provide support. Recovery requires specialized care from both sport psychologists and psychiatrists that is individualized to each athlete's unique experience, whether it's fear of re-injury, the intense pressure and stress of competition or team and/or coaching dynamics.

As some of the most celebrated Olympic athletes in the world, like Simone Biles and Michael Phelps, open up about their struggles with mental health, it's important for athletes of all levels to prioritize caring for their mental health so developing issues do not become debilitating barriers to their success and well-being.

"Top athletes who want an edge seek out sport psychology to address mental training as well as mental health. It's all about learning skills to manage stress," Carter said.

Experts say the best approach is to maintain regular mental health care just like physical health care. They also offer the following tips for athletes to focus on their mental health:

- **Speak up.** Athletes are trained to fight through physical and emotional pain. However, ignoring or hiding issues will only escalate the problem. Real toughness comes from self-awareness and effective coping with the joys and pain of life.
- **Find the right resources.** Because athletes often put on a brave face, it's more difficult to identify PTSD or other mental health issues. Trained sport psychologists and psychiatrists who work with athletes pick up subtle signs and address them. Athletic trainers and sports medicine physicians can help athletes connect with specialized professionals who understand the athlete experience.
- **Develop the entire self.** Athletes dedicate an immense amount of time and effort to their sport. At some point, they will have to part ways with competition, a major part of their lives. While ending an athletic career can be distressing, it's important to remember to set goals for retirement, develop aspects of identity outside of sport and talk to other athletes who have retired.

“At some point in time, athletes will end their career and move on to do other things in life,” Norman said. “Having an awareness and an openness to be able to seek treatment for mental health conditions can increase their quality of life longitudinally.”

###